Vanity and the Female Gaze: A Decolonial-Mystical Typology of the Projected Feminine

By

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Introduction — Mirror, Mask, Market

In an era shaped by the pixel and the algorithm, the ancient question of feminine self-presentation has reemerged with new and often disquieting intensity. The woman who once adorned herself before polished brass or still water now performs her selfhood before a screen — her reflection cast not into the private realm of contemplation, but into a globalized spectacle of validation, branding, and spiritualized consumption. Vanity — long denounced in religious literature as a moral failing or spiritual delusion — has morphed, mutated, and metastasized. But what, precisely, is vanity in a world of **#SelfLove**, **#HealingJourney**, and **#DivineFeminine**?

This essay attempts to answer that question through a multi-layered framework. Drawing on mystical theologies (Shaykhī-Bayānī, Islamic-Sufi, biblical and kabbalistic), psychoanalytic and archetypal psychology, and contemporary Black feminist, post-feminist, and decolonial theory, I argue that modern expressions of feminine vanity are not simply about beauty or

performance. They are about visibility, legibility, control, and survival in a capitalist-digital ecology that commodifies pain, identity, and spirit.

Vanity, in this context, must be understood not merely as an individual trait, but as a typology of projection — a spectrum of behaviors and psychic patterns wherein the feminine self is transformed into *content* for the gaze of others, whether divine, masculine, collective, or imagined. Importantly, the essay does not reduce this critique to a moral binary. Drawing on thinkers like bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Moya Bailey, Sara Ahmed, and Gloria Anzaldúa, it acknowledges that the regulation of Black and racialized female bodies has historically been a terrain of colonial and patriarchal violence. In this context, vanity can also become a form of resistance, reclamation, and embodied politics — though not always free from contradiction.

The spiritual terrain, too, is implicated. Within mystical traditions — particularly in Bayānī cosmology, where the feminine principle is both exalted and veiled — vanity represents a false unveiling, a kind of mimetic theophany that lacks anchorage in gnosis. It is the mirror without the light, the Name without the secret. And in these last days of algorithmic collapse and spiritual simulation, it is often through vanity that spiritual infiltration is achieved. Thus, to understand the typology of female vanity is not only to chart a psychosocial pathology, but to trace the contours of a metaphysical crisis — one that entangles race, gender, technology, and the soul.

Typology of Female Vanity — Archetypes, Algorithms, and Affects

Contemporary expressions of female vanity do not operate in a vacuum. They are encoded, incentivized, and curated by a convergence of digital capitalism, inherited gender codes, and modern spiritual economies. What follows is a fivefold typology of feminine vanity that maps the symbolic line between performance and embodiment, visibility and projection, sovereignty and simulation. Each archetype functions both psychologically and spiritually — emerging as a pattern of behavior, a mode of self-fashioning, and often, a portal of co-optation.

1. The Mirror-Bearer

Defining Trait: Obsessed with how she is seen — by others, by algorithms, by a projected 'divine masculine'.

In classical lore, this is **Narcissa**, staring not into the water but into her feed. She frames her every movement through filters, aphorisms, and '*I used to be broken but now I shine*' narratives. Her healing journey is always visible. Her revelations always shareable.

⟶ Modern Form:

- 'Spiritual influencer' who posts daily affirmations and reels about 'ascension' while showcasing curated aesthetics.

- Often performs ritual vulnerability (e.g. crying on camera) for engagement metrics.

⟶ Cultural Critique:

bell hooks (d. 2021 CE) warned that commodified 'self-love' often disguises deeper patterns of emotional labor and self-objectification (*All About Love*: 2001). In this frame, the Mirror-Bearer is not empowered — she is entangled in the loop of her own reflection.

⟶ Spiritual Danger:

The mirror becomes a black hole. The Divine Name is spoken, but never heard. She multiplies images of the Self, never arriving at the *Secret of the Self.* Vanity here is reflection without interiority.

2. The Ornamented Vessel

Defining Trait: External beautification, symbol overload, and spiritual accessorizing.

This archetype adorns herself with sacred symbols, body modifications, or curated naturalism. She may wear feathers, amulets, henna, or veils — often combining ancestral markers and New Age aesthetics into a single brand.

⟶ Modern Form:

- 'Priestess' or 'medicine woman' branding courses.

- The ayahuasca-influencer hybrid, photographed in deserts or jungles, glowing with “activated feminine light.”

⟶ Post-Feminist Critique:

According to Angela McRobbie, post-feminist culture encourages women to ‘choose’ hyper-feminine self-presentation under the guise of empowerment — while reinforcing patriarchal and capitalist ideals of beauty (*The Aftermath of Feminism*: 2008). The Ornamented Vessel performs spiritual capitalism in drag.

⟶ Spiritual Danger:

Adornment displaces embodiment. She becomes a vessel of image, but no longer of presence. Her sacred codes are cultural extractions, not inner initiations. Vanity here is aesthetics mistaken for essence.

3. The Seductive Prophetess

Defining Trait: Mystical charisma used as leverage. This figure speaks of downloads, transmissions, Magdalene codes, lunar gateways, or ‘being chosen’ — but uses the aura of revelation to seduce emotionally, sexually, or economically. She claims or implies access to divinity — yet rarely in humility. Her gaze is fixed not upward, but outward — measuring who watches her speak, who follows, who believes.

⟶ Modern Form:

- ‘Sex priestess’ or ‘Goddess activator’ with content offerings that blur spiritual insight and eroticism.
- Often monetizes trauma, intimacy, or racialized archetypes (Isis, Kali, Mary Magdalene) to build follower cults.

⟶ Decolonial Critique:

This archetype often appropriates Indigenous, Black, or Eastern spiritual symbols, emptying them of historical context. As Gleig and Gauthier note, spiritual platforms today often operate as ‘*white, feminine-coded spaces of extractive wellness’* (*Spiritual but Not Religious*: 2020).

Moya Bailey’s concept of *misogynoir* helps clarify the double harm: these women erase the *actual* Black or Indigenous feminine spiritualities they imitate, while building cults of personality around a simulated version (Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed*, 2021).

⟶ Spiritual Danger:

The Seductive Prophetess becomes a false mouthpiece of the divine — her aura feeds off attention, not light. What she channels is not *waḥy* (revelation), but *wahm* (illusion). Vanity here is divine simulation used for dominion.

4. The Wounded Narcissist

Defining Trait: Pain and trauma become identity and economy.

This archetype centers her survivorship — often real — but transforms it into a totalizing narrative. Her pain is sacred. Her trauma is the source of her mystical power. She is unaccountable, because she is perpetually healing.

⟶ Modern Form:

- 'Shadow work' and 'inner child' guides who continually relive or restage trauma for content.
- May accuse others of harm as projection of unresolved ego fractures.

⟶ Black Feminist Critique:

Audre Lorde warned against commodifying suffering without transformation: *Pain is important... but pain is not the only truth* (*Sister Outsider*: 1984). Saidiya Hartman similarly critiques the *spectacularization of Black suffering* — suggesting that constant performance of pain can reproduce the very domination it claims to resist (*Scenes of Subjection*: 1997).

⟶ Spiritual Danger:

The Wounded Narcissist confuses pathologized self-focus for spiritual authenticity. She draws others into her wound as if it were a shrine. But it is a sinkhole. Vanity here is sanctified trauma that never heals.

5. The Anti-Mirror

Defining Trait: Performs rejection of vanity, but is secretly obsessed with being seen as different, raw, or real. This figure cultivates a modest, humble, unadorned look — not for anonymity, but for *recognition as nonconformist*. She posts about fasting from social media, but lets everyone know she's doing it. She avoids makeup, but curates her 'natural' look with subtle perfection.

⟶ Modern Form:

- Hijabi influencers who market modest fashion as spiritual resistance, yet reinforce narrow norms.
- 'Raw and real' YouTubers who still edit and brand their chaos.

⟶ Post-Feminist & Queer Critique:

Sara Ahmed explores how *doing diversity* or *being good* can itself become a currency of social capital (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion*: 2004). The Anti-Mirror is caught in this bind — avoiding the mirror while demanding to be seen.

⟶ Spiritual Danger:

This archetype masks ego as asceticism. She appears to reject the world, but actually hungers for praise — *for not wanting praise*. Vanity here is the illusion of disinterest masking deep craving for recognition.

Historical and Spiritual Genealogies — From Eve to TikTok

Vanity, particularly as applied to the feminine, is not a recent concern. It is a deeply mythologized and symbolically saturated theme across scripture, esoteric traditions, and philosophical thought. From Eve to Lilith, from Fāṭima to Magdalene, from Jezebel to the nameless veiled women of eschatology, the idea of female self-regard gone astray has functioned as both moral warning and patriarchal projection. But to grasp contemporary female vanity through a mystical-political lens, as Jung did one must trace its roots not merely to Euro-Christian morality, but to archetypal structures of reflection, manifestation, and shadow in the metaphysics of gender.

Eve, the Mirror, and the Eye

In Genesis (and to some degree in the **Qur'ān**), Eve is not simply the first woman — she is the first to be looked upon, to be named, to be desired. In traditional Christian readings, Eve's vanity is implicit in her gaze toward the forbidden fruit — a gaze driven by longing, knowledge, and a desire *to become like God* (Genesis 3:5). But this is not pure arrogance. As Phyllis Trible has argued, Eve's act may reflect an intelligent desire for insight rather than foolish pride (*God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*: 1978). Still, in medieval Christian iconography, Eve becomes the origin of female temptation, often depicted with mirrors, snakes, and apples — the tools of vanity and seduction. The mirror becomes the weapon of the fallen feminine — and this typology is re-inscribed again and again.

Islamic Traditions and the Veiled Self

In Islamic thought, especially within Sufism, the feminine **is both elevated and** dangerous — the seat of divine tajallī (manifestation) and the locus of *fitna* (trial)**.** The *ḥadīth* of the Prophet Muḥammad — *I have not left behind a greater trial for men than women* — is often cited in legalistic contexts, but Sufis like Ibn ʿArabī reframe it to mean that the feminine is the ultimate veil of divine beauty, and thus the greatest trial because she bears the signs of God (*Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* II).

However, when this divine potential is reduced to surface — when the *ẓāhir* (outer form) eclipses the *bāṭin* (inner essence) — vanity emerges. In that light, female vanity is not mere pride; it is the theological distortion of divine receptivity into human projection**.** Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī (d. 1826 CE), the founder of the Shaykhī school, warned against *false manifestations* — where a being appears radiant but lacks spiritual substance (*Sharḥ al-Ziyārah* I)**.** The vain woman, in this sense, is a false theophany, a luminous simulacrum masking spiritual absence — or, in Akbarian terms, she is the manifestation of the Name, 'the Misguider' (*al-muḍill*) (see our discussion for the card of Eve of the **NUR Tarot**, in that regard).

The Bayānī View: The Unveiled Before Her Time

In the context of the Bayān, the female principle holds extreme eschatological gravity. The Primal Veil, the First Point, the Maid of Light — these are not gendered tropes, but *ontological conditions of divine emergence*. Yet, there is also a cautionary warning regarding premature unveiling — when one assumes the station of manifestation without divine sanction. This directly applies to vanity as a false epiphany — or, again, a manifestation of the Name, 'the Misguider' (*al-muḍill*). To therefore unveil without substance is to invite divine reversal. Vanity, as such, is a sort of *anti-theophany* — a vacuum which masquerades as light whilst obscuring the Point of the Word.

The Jezebel Complex in Western Evangelicalism

The figure of Jezebel, often cited in conservative Christian discourse, embodies the archetype of the painted, seductive, usurping woman — a threat to male prophecy. In **2 Kings 9:30**, she *painted her face and adorned her head* before her death — a moment often interpreted as vanity in the face of doom. But this has morphed into the *Jezebel spirit* trope — a misogynistic slur used by many Pentecostal and Evangelical communities to demonize assertive or sexually autonomous women, especially Black women. This rhetoric has been critiqued by womanist theologians such as Renita J. Weems for reinscribing racialized patriarchal control under spiritual pretenses (*Just a Sister Away*: 1988). Vanity, in this tradition, is no longer personal — it is **politicized**, **racialized**, and **demonized**.

From Magic Mirrors to TikTok Filters

Today's vanity does not come with eyeliner and gold bangles — it comes in filters, captions, curated grief posts, and algorithmic projection. As Legacy Russell writes in *Glitch Feminism* (2020), the '*digital self*' becomes a projected site of desire and resistance — but also of co-optation. The '*mirror*' is now encoded, not silvered — and it watches back.

TikTok mystics, Instagram priestesses, and 'womb-coded' seers now operate as distributed Jezebels: both celebrated and condemned, often replicating the very white heteropatriarchal gaze they claim to escape. They are not Eve after the apple — they are Eve with a ring light, selling bite-sized Edenic secrets for $99 a module.

The Contemporary Crisis

Across traditions, vanity is what happens when the outer reflects light it does not contain, when the feminine forgets her Source and seeks her reflection in others, and when the mirror is not cleaned, but multiplied. Contemporary platforms incentivize this distortion — and so vanity today is not just a sin or flaw, but a structural trap, a spiritual weapon, and sometimes a traumatized survival mechanism.

Black Feminist and Decolonial Critiques — Vanity, Visibility, and Resistance

Vanity, as a moral or spiritual category, has long been weaponized — especially against women racialized as deviant, hyper-visible, or dangerously embodied. In the global colonial-modern project, female visibility has not been neutral. It has been coded through slavery, objectification, exoticism, surveillance, and criminalization. Thus, to speak of female vanity today without engaging Black feminist and decolonial thought would be to perpetuate the very logics of control that gave rise to this typology in the first place.

Below we reframe the typology of vanity not only as *projection*, but also as *imposed legibility*: the demand to be seen, the fear of not being seen, and the violence of being seen *only as a body, only as a surface, only as a symbol.*

The Colonial Gaze and the Racialized Feminine

As Frantz Fanon made clear in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952; reprint: 2017), the colonized subject is *overdetermined by the gaze of whiteness*. She is not permitted opacity. She must be *known, categorized, fantasized, or destroyed*. This racialized over-visibility is especially acute for women, because the Black woman's body has historically functioned as:

- A **site of labor** (reproduction, servitude),
- A **site of pleasure** (hypersexualization),

- A **site of fear** (pathologized rage, Jezebel stereotypes),
- And a **site of silence** (erasure of subjectivity).

Thus, when a woman who has been historically silenced makes herself visible, it may not be vanity — it may be survival. As **Saidiya Hartman** puts it: *What is the value of telling your story if it confirms the dominant narrative?* (*Scenes of Subjection*: 1997)

Moya Bailey and the Misogynoir Frame

Moya Bailey's term *misogynoir* captures the unique form of hatred directed at Black women — particularly in digital spaces — where hypervisibility meets cultural disposability. In this light, a Black woman's makeup, fashion, self-promotion, or even spirituality may be read as *vanity* by dominant culture, but *aesthetic armor* by those who understand the **double violence** of being *both watched* and *erased*.

Bailey's later work, *Misogynoir Transformed* (2021), explores how Black women use digital platforms to reclaim space, curate their image, and refuse respectability. What looks like 'narcissism' to one viewer may be, in fact, an **act of ontological resistance**.

bell hooks and the Politics of the Oppositional Gaze

In her classic essay, *The Oppositional Gaze* (1992), bell hooks writes of how Black women have historically been denied the right to look, and simultaneously made the object of consumption. The Black feminine gaze, she argues, is punished, feared, and often pathologized. When Black women *choose to gaze* back, or to perform selfhood with deliberate spectacle, they challenge this system. In this sense, some forms of 'vanity' may be ritual refusals of invisibility.

hooks also critiques the white feminist embrace of beauty rituals as empowerment, asking whether these performances challenge patriarchy or merely *reinscribe its aesthetics with new slogans* (*Black Looks: Race and Representation*: 1992).

Hijab, Modesty, and Postcolonial Vanity

In postcolonial Muslim societies, the tension around feminine visibility is **not** merely internal — it's ideologically inherited. The colonial critique of the veil cast Muslim women as either:

- **Too covered** (oppressed, silent),
- Or **too unveiled** (westernized, immoral).

Thus, within contemporary Islamic spiritual spaces, 'vanity' often becomes a code for modernity, freedom, or perceived disobedience — but this, too, can be a trap.

As **Leila Ahmed** has argued, both *veiling* and *unveiling* have been tools of political control (*Women and Gender in Islam*: 1992). In many online Muslim spaces today, hijab influencers walk a fine line — performing modesty for visibility, marketing piety for engagement. Here, vanity is embedded in the very economy of religious self-fashioning.

Glamour and the Radical Reclamation of the Face

Black feminist and queer thinkers have proposed that glamour, long associated with vanity, can be a form of *counter-sorcery*. In Madison Moore's *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (2018), dressing up, shining, being 'extra', or *choosing beauty* are forms of defiance against a world that says 'you are too much'. Feminist trans theorist Sandy Stone once described the 'passing' trans woman not as deceiving, but as refusing disappearance in a culture that demands her erasure. In this way, vanity — even excess — can be ritual, performance, spell, and shield. But there is a razor's edge. When performance becomes self-objectification, when the mask consumes the face, then vanity crosses from *reclamation* into *delirium*.

Vanity or Visibility?

So where does this leave our typology? Not all mirrors are tools of ego. Not all adornment is empty. And not all visibility is vanity. But the danger is real. In a platformed world of infinite spectators, predatory algorithms, and capitalized spirituality, the line between **sacred presence** and **projected simulation** is razor thin. And this is where mysticism must speak — not to moralize, but to discern.

Metaphysical Consequences — Mysticism, False Light, and the Veil of Projection

In mystical cosmologies across traditions, the feminine is not merely a gendered identity, but a *mode of manifestation* — the vessel, the mirror, the sign, the Face of the hidden God. When rightly ordered, this feminine is the veil of beauty (*ḥijāb al-jamāl*) through which the divine reflects itself into the cosmos. But when that mirror reflects only the self, when the vessel confuses its adornment for its essence, the theophany becomes inverted. This is the metaphysical catastrophe of vanity in its deepest form — not simply self-absorption, but the mimicking of divine presence without divine anchorage.

False Theophany: When the Mirror Lies

In the Bayānī cosmology, the idea of *tajallī* (divine self-disclosure) is central. But it is always hierarchically ordered: light emerges through stations of the Divine Will, not personal desire. To assume the light without its source — to claim the

reflection without the root — is called false manifestation (*ẓuhūr al-bāṭil*). This typifies spiritual vanity:

In this frame, the vain woman — spiritually adorned, verbally awakened, psychically resonant — masquerades as the Real, but is unanchored from the command (*amr*). She is a projected theophany, not a received one. And herein lies the danger.

The Inversion of Light: Shimmer Without Substance

Sufis speak of the *nafs al-ammāra*— the commanding soul — as the first veil on the path to union. When the *nafs* co-opts spiritual language, mystical experience, or divine imagery, it becomes what ʿAlī al-Hujwīrī called 'the light of fireflies — it shines but does not burn'. This is shimmer without substance, a sorcery of the image. It deceives others. It deceives the self. And worst of all, it mimics the signs of awakening to sabotage the seeker. al-Aḥsāʾī warns: *There are forms that wear the Names, but are barren of their Reality* (*Sharḥ al-Ziyārah* I).

The Sorcery of the Feminine Unmoored

In kabbalistic terms, this phenomenon parallels Lilith, the estranged Shekhinah. Once the luminous feminine presence, Lilith becomes the 'mirror turned against the divine', wielding sexuality and power not as receptacles of union, but as **weapons of control**. Lilith in this register is not the liberated

woman — she is the disembodied self, cut off from **Binah** (understanding) and Hochmah (wisdom), floating in the qliphoth, the empty husks of form. Likewise, modern mystical vanity — the '*divine feminine*' invoked without submission to the Real — becomes Qlippah: shell without fruit.

Projection as Infiltration: The Weaponized Mystic

We have observed that some forms of the 'feminine mystic' today function not as healers but as infiltrators. They weaponize trauma, grace, spiritual language, and erotic allure not for union, but for disruption. Their performance of receptivity conceals a structure of domination — emotional, psychic, sometimes institutional. These are the faux prophets of the Self— they dwell in illusion and feed on light not their own. Their vanity is not just ego. It is a magic of confusion, a psychic virus, a mirror set to distort the image of the Beloved.

The Return of the Veil: Spiritual Modesty as Protection

If vanity is the unveiling of what should be veiled, then modesty in the mystical sense is not repression — it is **protection of the sacred**. To veil the face, to withhold the light, to disclose only to the Worthy — this is not shame. It is the law of divine order. In the **Zohar**, the Shekhinah veils herself in sorrow when the world profanes her. So too the awakened feminine must learn to veil — not

in fear, but in discernment. The sacred cannot be streamed. The Real does not pose for selfies: *The Sun does not chase the mirror. It waits to be rightly reflected*!

Summary: Vanity as Eschatological Sign

In the end, the spread of feminine vanity — spiritualized, platformed, weaponized — is not simply a cultural concern. It is an **eschatological sign**. A fissure in the order of reflection. A false dawn. And as in all sacred traditions, false light precedes true Judgment. When the veils are lifted, the adornments stripped, the Names tested — only the Real remains.

Beyond the Mirror: Toward a Gnosis of the Feminine

Vanity, as we have traced it, is more than surface; it is a symptom of estrangement. Estrangement from the Real, from self-knowing, from the divine order of reflection. It is a distortion born of colonial trauma, algorithmic mimicry, and the warping of sacred symbols under late-capitalist technocracy. Yet to simply condemn it is insufficient. What is needed is a **gnosis of the feminine** — a path of return, a healing of the mirror.

The Mirror Redeemed: Beauty as Theophany

In Bayānī and Sufi metaphysics, beauty (*jamāl*) is not evil. It is one of the faces of God. What matters is not the beauty itself, but its **anchorage** — whether it is

for God or for self-idolatry; whether it leads to union or veils the path. The rightly adorned feminine is not the passive vessel, nor the dominant sorceress. She is **the mirror turned to the sun**, the locus of *tajallī* (self-disclosure) who says with Maryam, *I have no lord but He who created me.* When she reflects the divine light without trying to possess it, she dissolves into radiance. This is the feminine gnosis.

The Unvanquished Body: From Surveillance to Sovereignty

Black feminist and decolonial thought offers a vital corrective here. The body, so long policed and projected upon, must be reclaimed not for display, but for **sovereignty** — the right to opacity, the right to silence, the right not to perform. bell hooks writes, *'Our bodies are not here to be understood. They are here to be honored'.* To honor is not to expose. It is to veil what is sacred, and to shine where one is free. The post-vanity feminine refuses both the *fetish of the veil* and the *fetish of the reveal*. She navigates a third path — of embodied discernment, where aesthetic expression becomes sacrament and modesty becomes liberation.

Discernment in the Age of False Light

We live in a time of mimicry — when almost anything sacred has been simulated, commodified, and algorithmically replicated. The 'divine feminine' can now be downloaded. Tantra is sold in online courses. 'Shadow work' is

branded content. In such a world, the question is not whether light is present — but **whether it is real**. Discernment is not optional. It is spiritual survival.

The one who seeks to move beyond vanity must ask:

- *Am I being seen, or am I being scanned?*
- *Is this intimacy, or is this extraction?*
- *Do I mirror the Real, or mimic its image?*

And above all: *Whose Name do I reflect?*

Toward a New Feminine Esotericism

What comes after the false unveiling? A feminine gnosis grounded in:

- Sacred embodiment (not objectification),
- Radiant humility (not projection),
- Sovereign discernment (not trauma-bypassing),
- And mystical service (not performance).

This is not a return to patriarchy or control. It is a liberation into divine alignment — where the soul is no longer a brand, the body no longer bait, and the Name no longer misused. In this vision, vanity is not simply escaped — it is **transfigured**. The mirror does not disappear. It becomes **clear**. And what it shows, finally, is the Face that never dies.